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HENDRIK KERN AND THE BODY OF THE BUDDHA*

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Abstract

The body of the Buddha plays a vital role in Buddhism in virtually all its forms. Indeed, it has rightly been observed that “the cult of [bodily] relics is central to all Buddhisms”. In spite of this, Hendrik Kern held views about the body of the Buddha which are hard to reconcile with relic worship. These views were not accepted, not even in Kern’s own time. The present paper will argue that, even though Kern’s position was no doubt extreme, the scholarly consensus that has taken its place is in need of serious reconsideration.

I am delighted to be the first speaker invited by or for the newly created “Leiden Society for the Study of Buddhism”. Faced with this honour, it seemed only natural that I will speak about a topic that is somehow connected with Buddhist studies in Leiden. After some reflection I have chosen something that connects the most recent representative of Buddhist studies in Leiden with its first one. The most recent representative of Buddhist studies in Leiden is, of course, Professor Jonathan Silk, the founder of the “Leiden Society for the Study of Buddhism”. The first one, the scholar who brought Buddhist academic studies to Leiden, is Hendrik Kern. His name adorns this institute until today.

To refresh your memory, let me remind you that among the numerous subjects that Kern wrote about, Buddhism occupied an important place. His *Manual of Indian Buddhism*, which first came out in 1896, is still regularly reprinted in India, it seems. And the *Geschiedenis van het Buddhisme in Indië* (“A History of Buddhism in India”) was perhaps his most important work. It came out in two volumes, in 1882 and 1884 respectively, in Haarlem.

Which is the topic that links Hendrik Kern to Jonathan Silk? It is the body of the Buddha. I hardly need to remind you that Professor Silk’s most recent book is about the body of the Buddha. It is called *Body Language: Indic śarīra and Chinese shèlì in the Mahāparinirvāna-sūtra and Saddharma-puṇḍarīka*, and came out in 2006.¹ As we have come to expect from Professor Silk, it is a pro-

* This is the slightly expanded text of a lecture given on the occasion of the inaugural lecture by Prof. Jonathan Silk, Leiden University, 1st April 2008.

1 Tokyo: The International Institute for Buddhist Studies. 2006 (Studia Philologica Buddhica, Monograph Series, 19).

foundly learned work which presents an in-depth interpretation of texts from various sources and in different languages that deal primarily with the events surrounding the Buddha's body at and immediately after his death.

What, you will ask, is Hendrik Kern's contribution to the study of the body of the Buddha? Kern was remarkable for being virtually the only one in the history of Buddhist studies to maintain that the Buddha had no body and had never had one. The story of the Buddha's life, according to Kern, was a sun myth. I cite the words of Prof. J. W. de Jong who, had he still been alive today, would certainly have been invited to become an honorary member of the "Leiden Society for the Study of Buddhism"; unfortunately he died in 2000. In his *A Brief History of Buddhist Studies in Europe and America* he wrote the following:²

In the first volume [of his history of Buddhism in India] Kern began by relating the life of the Buddha according to Pāli and Sanskrit sources [...] After having retold the legend of the Buddha in great detail, Kern arrived at his interpretation. Like [the French scholar Émile] Senart, he considered the Buddha to be a solar god. However, Kern was much more astronomical in his exegesis than Senart. The twelve *nidāna* are the twelve months of the year. The six heretical teachers are the planets. The Buddha's first preaching takes place in mid-summer, and this is why the Middle Way is its theme. Kern never hesitates in his identifications with stars, planets, and constellations.

Kern had been influenced by Senart. He also managed to convince Auguste Barth. But whereas Senart and Barth "did admit the possibility that reliable information had been handed down concerning the life of the Buddha", "Kern entirely dissolved the historical Buddha into the solar god" (DE JONG, p. 30).³ In other words, Kern was alone in thinking that there was no such thing as a body of the Buddha.

2 Tokyo: Kōsei Publishing, 1997, p. 29.

3 Hermann Jacobi, who translated Kern's *Geschiedenis van het Buddhismus in Indië* into German in the very same years in which the Dutch volumes came out, takes already in his "Vorwort des Übersetzers" pain to distance himself from some of Kern's positions: "Von der Erlaubnis des Verfassers, zu ändern und zuzufügen, habe ich nur zuweilen in den Anmerkungen Gebrauch gemacht, um Einzelnes hinzuzufügen oder anders zu deuten, wobei ich meine den ganzen mythologischen Erklärungsversuch betreffende abweichende Auffassung möglichst in den Hintergrund treten liess" (p. VII–VIII; my emphasis, JB).

We see that Kern's ideas about the solar nature of the Buddha were already extreme in his own time.⁴ They have found no followers in more recent times. Unless I am seriously mistaken, the historical existence of the Buddha has not been called into question again since Kern. Different scholars hold different positions as to how much we know or can find out about the life of the historical Buddha. Some feel secure in reconstructing episodes from his life, where others are sceptical about the very possibility of doing so. But most would agree on the end of the Buddha's life. Here again, there may be differences about details; the main facts seem clear: The Buddha died in a small village, his dead body was incinerated, and the remains were put in a number of stūpas.

These events are rather crucial for the further development of Buddhism. It is probably no exaggeration to state that Buddhism in virtually all of its forms is, and presumably was, accompanied by relic worship. For many adherents relic worship was perhaps the only Buddhism they ever knew. Indeed, “[t]he cult of relics is central to all Buddhisms”.⁵ Stūpas have followed Buddhism wherever it went, and many stūpas contain, at least ideally, relics of the Buddha's body. The distribution of these relics after the incineration of the Buddha's body is a vital part of Buddhism, much more vital for the religion than most things that presumably happened to the Buddha during his life. Many Buddhists may feel reassured that modern scholarship looks upon these specific events as fundamentally trustworthy historical facts, whatever the details.

Seen in this way, Kern's position has now been definitely abandoned. Contrary to what he thought, the Buddha did exist, he had a body that was incinerated after his death, and the remains of this physical body found their way into a number of stūpas.

In this lecture I do not wish to revive Kern's thesis. I will however suggest that some of the certainties which Buddhist practitioners and Buddhist scholars appear to share may be in need of reconsideration. A renewed consideration of the available evidence has created in me, at least, some doubt about the veracity of this shared conviction.

Let me, to begin with, remind you that the Buddhist custom of relic and stūpa worship continues a tradition that is older than Buddhism.⁶ One passage of the Vedic *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (13.8.1.5) speaks about the “demonic people of

4 Kern, in his *Manual of Indian Buddhism* (p. 12), refers to “a few of the unbelievers” who “have gone to such length as to see in [the] history [of the Buddha] the remoulding of an ancient myth”, and contrasts these with others who are “less radical”.

5 SKILLING, 2005:271.

6 BRONKHORST, 2007:4f.

the east” who were in the habit of constructing sepulchral mounds that were round, unlike the four-cornered ones used by the followers of the Veda. Scholars agree that these constructions cannot but be the ancestors of what came to be called *stūpas*. The Buddhists continued this tradition, but were not the only ones to do so. We have literary and archaeological evidence to show that Jainism, too, had its *stūpas*, as did perhaps Ājīvikism. Jainism still has them, Peter Flügel points out in a very recent article (2008). He states (p. 18): “[R]esearch in 2000–2001 produced the first documentation of two modern Jain bone relic *stūpas*, a *samādhi-mandira* and a *smāraka*, constructed by the Terāpanth Śvetāmbara Jains. Subsequent fieldwork demonstrated that relic *stūpas* are not only a feature of the aniconic Jain traditions [...], but also of Mūrtipūjaka [...] and Digambara traditions. Hence, the initial hypothesis that the contemporary Jain cult of bone relics functions either as substitute or as a prototype for image-worship had to be amended.”

It is possible that essentially the same tradition is also preserved in a custom that is commonly thought of as Hindu.⁷ The corpses of certain renouncers are not incinerated, but buried. Sometimes their bodies are placed in a tomb; the name used in modern Indian languages for such tombs is *samādhi*,⁸ presumably because the renouncer concerned was believed to be enclosed in this tomb while in a state of yogic meditation called *samādhi*. Local traditions sometimes maintain that the saint buried in this manner remains alive, immersed in yogic absorption. David White, a specialist of the Nath Yogis, tells me that these yogis are believed to be interred in these *samādhis*, packed in salt with head above ground and body below, rapt in eternal yogic trance and not really dead. *Samādhis* of this kind can become centres of pilgrimage, such as, for example, the *samādhi* of Jñānadeva in Alandi, near Pune in Maharashtra.

Véronique Bouillier, a specialist of Śaiva ascetic traditions, responded to my request for information about *samādhis* in the following words (e-mail of 1.10.2007):⁹

Ce sont [...] effectivement des tombeaux dans lesquels l’ascète est enterré, immédiatement après sa mort, assis en position de méditation, *padmasana*. Il y a des règles quant à la profondeur de la fosse, sa disposition (face au nord) et ce qu’on y met: il fait verser une certaine quantité de sel (plutôt dans le cas des Dasnami Sannyasi) ou de sucre (dans le cas des Nath

7 For details, see BRONKHORST, 2005:55f.

8 “India is a country dotted with the *samādhis* [...] of its great yogins” (WHITE, 1996:188).

9 Cp. BOUILLIER, 1979:139f., 175f.; 1997:153f.

Yogis) dans la fosse avant de la combler. Une fois l'ascète enterré, un monument plus ou moins durable peut être érigé en fonction du statut ou du renom de l'ascète enterré.

Toutes les variations sont possibles: ainsi dans le cas de Sannyasi redevenus villageois que j'avais étudié au Népal, les morts étaient enterrés au bord d'un fleuve, un entassement de pierres était disposé sur leur lieu de sépulture qui était emporté avec la crue du fleuve et nulle trace ne restait de leur tombe. Dans d'autres cas, il existe des sortes de cimetières.

Le plus intéressant à mes yeux, c'est le lien entre *samadhi* et monastère. Beaucoup de math se sont constitués et se sont développés autour de la tombe où est enseveli leur fondateur. Cette tombe devient le point central du monastère et le point d'ancrage de la transmission de la lignée monastique. Autour de cette tombe initiale, peuvent être regroupées ensuite les tombes des successeurs. Il s'agit alors de véritables monuments, souvent de petits tumulus en forme de Shivalinga, dans le cas des monastères shivaïtes. Ces sépultures sont totalement intégrées à la fois aux lieux et à la vie rituelle des monastères qui les abritent.

Quant aux croyances qui accompagnent cet ensevelissement, il est vrai que l'on pense les ascètes plongés dans un état de profonde méditation et d'une certaine façon toujours présents, en *samadhi*, dans leur *samadhi*, en jouant sur les deux sens du mot. Si cette croyance est particulièrement importante pour les Nath Yogis qui ont fait de la recherche de l'immortalité le but de leur ascèse, elle n'est cependant répandue que pour les "grands ascètes". Ce sont eux que l'on tient pour particulièrement saints que l'on dit toujours et éternellement vivants, en "*jivit samadhi*". Cette expression est assez ambiguë; si elle désigne en principe ces ascètes qui ont atteint de leur vivant un état de Délivré, de nos jours elle s'applique plutôt aux ascètes qui ont, à la fin de leur vie, annoncé et programmé la date et l'heure de leur "mort", ou plutôt de l'arrêt de leur souffle. Ils sont alors enterrés à l'endroit même où ils sont expirés et leurs tombes sont vénérées et visitées par les dévots laïques.

Le culte qui se développe autour de ces tombes offre beaucoup de ressemblance avec celui qui entoure les tombes des saints musulmans, les grandes *dargah*.

Mais il reste toujours une grande incertitude de la part des gens ordinaires quant à la condition réelle de ces morts, et souvent une certaine crainte.

I know that *samādhis* like these do not appear in the archaeological records before the 12th century CE.¹⁰ It seems yet clear that they continue an earlier tradition, in which renouncers were not necessarily buried in tombs. Inhumation without stone or brick tombs has occurred from an early date on, and still seems to occur today. Abbé Dubois' *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, published in the first half of the 19th century, but based without acknowledgement on a work by the French Jesuit Coeurdoux written in 1777, contains an elaborate account, presumably an eye-witness account of such a burial, which reads as follows:¹¹

10 BAKKER (2007:35) thinks that the appearance of *samādhis* in the post 1200 CE period may be partly due to Islamic influence: "How to explain that we have no archaeological evidence of this sort of ancient monuments of yogins, whereas we have innumerable ones of Buddhist saints?" See however below.

11 DUBOIS, 1906:538f.; for Coeurdoux' original French, see MURR, 1987: I:131f.

The ceremonies which accompany the funerals of sannyasis differ in many respects from those of ordinary Brahmins. Vanaprasthas, like ordinary Brahmins, are burned after death; but sannyasis are invariably buried, no matter what their rank or sect may be.

The son of a sannyasi (should the deceased have had one born to him before he embraced this state) must preside at the funeral. In default of a son, there is always some pious Brahmin who will take on himself the duty and bear the cost. There is often, indeed, much rivalry as to who shall have the honour of filling this office, as it is considered a most meritorious one. After the corpse has been washed in the usual manner, it is wrapped in two cloths dyed yellow with *kavi*. It is then rubbed all over with ashes, and a chaplet of large seeds called *rudrakshas* is fastened round the neck. While all this is going on the other Brahmins play on bronze castanets, which makes an ear-splitting noise.

Everything being in readiness for the obsequies, the body is placed, with its legs crossed, in a large bamboo basket, which is hung from a strong bamboo pole by ropes of straw. This basket is borne by four Brahmins. The grave must be dug near a river or a tank, and must be about six feet deep and circular in form. When they reach the spot the Brahmins deposit at the bottom of the grave a thick layer of salt, on which they place the deceased, with the legs still crossed. They then fill the hole with salt till it reaches the sannyasi's neck, pressing it well down so that the head may remain immovable. On the head, thus left exposed they break innumerable cocoanuts until the skull is completely fractured. They then, for the third time, throw in salt in sufficient quantities to entirely cover the remains of the head. Over the grave they erect a kind of platform, or mound, three feet in height, on the top of which they place a *lingam* of earth about two feet high. This obscene object is immediately consecrated by the Brahmins, who offer to it a sacrifice of lighted lamps, flowers, and incense, and for *neivedya*, bananas and *paramannam*, a dish to which the Brahmins are particularly partial, and which is composed of rice, cocoanut, and sugar. While these offerings are being made, hymns are sung in honour of Vishnu, all present screaming at the top of their voices.

This discordant music over, the presiding Brahmin walks round the *lingam* three times, makes a profound obeisance to it, expresses the hope that by virtue of the sacrifice offered to the image the deceased may be fully satisfied, that Siva may look favourably on him, that Brahma may receive him into his abode, and that thus he may escape another re-incarnation in this world. He then pours a little rice and a few drops of water on the ground, picks up all the fragments of the cocoanut shells that have been broken on the head of the deceased, and distributes them to those present, who scramble for the pieces, so eager are they to possess these relics, which are supposed to bring good luck. The *paramannam* is then divided among those who have no children, for when acquired under these circumstances it possesses the power of making barren women fruitful. The ceremonies of the day end with ablutions: not that the mourners need to purify themselves from any defilement, because none is contracted in attending the funeral of a *sannyasi*; but these ablutions serve instead of the bath which all Brahmins must take three times a day.

For ten successive days after the funeral the person who has presided thereat, and several other Brahmins in his company, meet every morning at the grave of the deceased to renew the offerings to the *lingam*. A similar ceremony takes place on the anniversary of his death.

[...]

The tombs of these *sannyasis* sometimes become famous, and crowds of devotees flock to them, bringing offerings and sacrifices as if to divine beings.

This custom did not die out in the 18th and 19th centuries, and continues today.¹² More interesting for us at present is that this custom is already mentioned in connection with deceased *saṃnyāsins* in two para-Vedic texts, the *Baudhāyana-pitrmedha-sūtra* and the *Vaikhānasa-grhya-sūtra*, and in some more recent texts, among them the *Smṛtyarthasāra*, which dates from around 1200 CE, and Yādava Prakāśa's *Yatidharmasamuccaya*, which dates from the eleventh century. Three of these four texts, the *Vaikhānasa-grhya-sūtra*, the *Smṛtyarthasāra* and the *Yatidharmasamuccaya*, state explicitly that there is no impurity associated with this custom.¹³

I have argued in a recent publication (2007, esp. p. 85f.) that the *saṃnyāsin* – more often called *parivrājaka* in the early texts – continues a tradition that originally belonged to the region I call Greater Magadha. This tradition was subsequently integrated into a Brahmanical scheme. The *saṃnyāsins* mentioned in the texts just considered, including the account by Coeurdoux & Dubois, were Brahmanical renouncers, to be sure. But apparently these renouncers had preserved some peculiarities that do not at all fit in their new Brahmanical surroundings, and which are most easily explained as survivals from their original milieu. In this original milieu there was no horror for dead bodies, no obsession with ritual purity, and a tendency to honour the mortal remains of people who had been held in respect. This was presumably the attitude to dead bodies that prevailed in Greater Magadha before the Brahmanical obsession with ritual purity smothered it.

It is therefore possible to formulate the following hypothesis: The original funerary practices of Greater Magadha are behind a number of customs that have survived, most notably the relic and stūpa worship of Buddhists, Jainas and perhaps Ājīvikas, and the peculiar burial customs used for certain types of Hindu renouncers. The fact that these last customs are strongly represented in Nepal, where Muslims are relatively few in number and marginal, argues against the alternative hypothesis that these Hindu customs are mere imitations of originally Muslim ones.

12 Cp. Kane, HistDh IV p. 229: "A *yati* (*sannyāsin*) was and is even now buried." See further BRIGGS, 1938:39f.

13 BRONKHORST, 2007:56, with references; further OLIVELLE, 1995:176f., 380f.

This hypothesis sounds plausible enough. There is however an irritating difficulty: the *saṃnyāsin*'s body is not cremated. What is more, some features suggest that attempts were made to preserve his body. The bodies of saints that have been placed in a so-called *samādhi*, to begin with, are often rumoured to be still there in the same state. More directly pertinent to our quest is the huge amount of salt (sometimes sugar) in which dead *saṃnyāsins* are covered. Salt desiccates the body and slows down its decay. This makes most sense if attempts were made to preserve the body of exceptional people, at least for some time. If so, why then were no attempts made to preserve the body of the Buddha?

Let us, at this point, review the evidence we have. The treatment reserved for the mortal remains of *saṃnyāsins* suggests that cremation may not have been customary in Greater Magadha. It is even possible that attempts were made to preserve bodies for at least some time. We will return to this point in a while.

Another potential source of information is Vedic literature. What information can we derive from it? The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* passage considered earlier only criticizes the shape of the (round) sepulchral mound of its eastern neighbours; this does not help. A passage from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* is more promising, for it states in so many words that the (followers of) the demons “adorn the body of someone who has died with offerings of food, with garments, and with ornaments” (ChānUp 8.8.5: *pretasya śarīram bhikṣayā vasanenālaṅkāreneti saṃskurvanti*). Perhaps the only event recorded in surviving literature that corresponds to this way of treating a dead body in early India concerns the dead body of the Buddha, before his cremation, by the inhabitants of a neighbouring town. These people, the Mallas, offer garlands of flowers, cloth, perfumes, music, dance, lights, etc., and go on doing so for seven days.¹⁴ John Strong (2004:111) comments that such is not the usual way of conducting a funeral in India. Perhaps so, but what came to be the “usual way” does not have to have been usual at the time and in the region of the Buddha. Perhaps the Buddha was one of those whom the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* calls the followers of the demons, just as the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* called the builders of stūpas demonic people. Let us leave this question, too, in suspense and move on.

What evidence do we have about embalming corpses in ancient India? P. V. Kane (HistDh IV p. 233f.) says the following about it:

Embalming the dead for some time at least was not quite unknown in India. The [Sa-tyāśādha Śrautasūtra] 29.4.29 and [Vaikhānasa Śrautasūtra] 31.23 prescribe that if an

14 Cp. SILK, 2006:24f.

āhitāgni died away from his people his corpse should be laid down in a tub or trough filled with sesame oil and brought home in a cart.¹⁵ In the Rāmāyaṇa it is several times said that the body of Daśaratha was placed for several days in a tub containing oil till the arrival of Bharata (vide Ayodhyā 66.14–16, 76.4 [= Rām 2.60.12–14; 2.70.4]). In the Viṣṇupurāṇa [4.5.7] it is stated that the body of Nimi being covered with oil and fragrant substances did not become decomposed and looked as if the death was recent.

All we can learn from these passages is that their authors had some ideas about how to preserve a dead body: in their opinion it has to be immersed in oil (*taila*), more precisely, in a *tailadronī*, a tub filled with oil. These passages do not constitute evidence that embalming bodies in other than exceptional circumstances was an ancient Brahmanical custom. Somewhat more suggestive is a passage in the Pāli *Ānguttara Nikāya*.¹⁶ Here King Muṇḍa wishes to preserve the body of his beloved but deceased wife Bhaddā, and the method he proposes is immersion in an iron tub filled with oil (*tela-donī*). A Buddhist monk talks him out of it.

Let us now look again at the canonical accounts of the demise of the Buddha. The Buddha tells Ānanda, just before his death, that his dead body should be treated like the body of a world-ruler (*cakravartin*). It should be wrapped in a certain number of cotton cloths and then be put in an iron tub filled with oil.¹⁷ The expression here used – *tailapūrṇā dronī*, Pāli *teladonī* – is identical with the one used in the different texts just considered. *There* the immersion into a tub full of oil served the purpose of preservation. Could it possibly serve the same purpose in the Buddhist *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* as well?

The German scholar Ernst Waldschmidt was indeed of this opinion.¹⁸ He pointed out that the dead body of the Buddha, according to the canonical accounts, was not cremated until seven days after his demise, so that it made sense to take measures to preserve it. The main weakness of this explanation is that, in the surviving account, the corpse of the Buddha was put into the tub *after* those seven days. In other words, the dead body of the Buddha had been preserved by unknown means *before* it was put in a bath of oil; it had not been preserved *because* of the bath of oil.

A second difficulty results from the fact that, when at last the cremation takes place, the corpse of the Buddha is not taken out of the tub with oil. In other words, the oil-filled tub, with the corpse of the Buddha in it, is put on the funeral

15 *deśāntare mṛtasya śarīram tailadronyām avadhāya śakaṭenāhare[t]*; CALAND, 1941:312.

16 AN III p. 57f.; cp. STRONG, 2004:107f.

17 BAREAU, 1970–1971: II:35f.; 1975:155f.

18 WALDSCHMIDT, 1944–1948:263f.

pyre. This is problematic since, as the French scholar André Bareau observed, the body of the Buddha would in this way be deep-fried, like a fish in a pan, rather than being reduced to ashes.¹⁹

Bareau, who initially felt attracted to Waldschmidt's ideas, returned to the question in a more recent publication (1975). Here he suggested another explanation for the tub with oil. The extreme rarity of the use of this device to preserve a body, he proposes, had been misunderstood by the early followers of the Buddha to indicate excellence of the highest degree: only world-rulers and, of course, Buddhas would undergo this treatment after death. They therefore inserted the episode with the iron tub with oil into the story, even though it did not fit there at all.

Bareau's new explanation does not stand up to criticism either. It is, as a matter of fact, marred by a misunderstanding. This is due to a peculiarity of a work of scholarship on which Bareau bases his reflections. This work is the standard treatise on funeral practices in ancient India, *Die Altindischen Todten- und Bestattungsgebräuche* by W. Caland, published in 1896. Caland mentions the fact that an *āhitāgni*, i.e. a Brahmin who maintains the sacred fire, who has died in a foreign country can be taken back home in a tub full of oil. Unfortunately Caland does not support this with any references, no doubt as the result of an oversight.²⁰ The Śrauta Sūtra passages considered above are not mentioned, nor are any other Vedic, para-Vedic or non-Vedic passages. All we find in Caland's book is a reference to the case of Daśaratha. Bareau was obviously misled by Caland's oversight, concluding that this kind of treatment was reserved for kings and highly placed personalities. Had he known the Śrauta Sūtra passages that prescribe this treatment, he might not have drawn this conclusion, for these passages do not concern kings, but *āhitāgnis*, i.e. Brahmins who maintain the sacred fire.

We can yet agree with Bareau that the traditional accounts of the funeral events concerning the Buddha combine incompatible elements. Bareau's explanation is not plausible, as we have seen. Another explanation is however possible. It is conceivable that an earlier account of the events was subsequently modified, leaving some elements in the new account that no longer fit. Accor-

19 BAREAU, 1970–1971: II:43. Cp. STRONG, 2004:106 n. 21: “Upon being asked what would happen if a corpse were to be cremated in such a container as the *taila-droṇī*, the director of a local crematorium [...] said that, with the top on, there would be a risk of explosion, and with the top off, the corpse would basically get boiled in oil, which would result in a ‘gross mess’ (described as rendered fat with bones floating in it).”

20 CALAND, 1896:87f.

ding to this hypothesis, the initial account described the entombment, without cremation, of the Buddha into a stūpa. This event was then preceded by a period during which the corpse was preserved by immersing it in oil. Preservation of the body was necessary, presumably to provide enough time to build the stūpa. This initial account was subsequently changed. In the modified version the body of the Buddha was cremated. However, it was no longer possible to remove the episode with the tub full of oil. It kept its place, in spite of having become an anomaly in the new story.

This hypothesis depends crucially on the absence of an assumption which Bareau took for granted. Bareau was sure that those accompanying the Buddha during and after his moment of death wished to execute the funerary rites in accordance with Brahmanical custom, i.e. in agreement with the rules laid down in Brahmanical texts. I do not share this assumption. The Buddha lived in an area that was not Brahmanized, and which had its own customs in all domains, including that of the disposal of its dead. It follows that the preservation of corpses, though perhaps exceedingly rare in Brahmanized areas, may have been more common in Greater Magadha.²¹ The composers of the initial accounts may have known what they were talking about.

At this point some crucial questions have to be asked: Why should the Buddhist tradition have introduced such a radical change? Why should cremation be substituted for direct entombment? We might consider that ashes are less impure than a rotting corpse, but this may not suffice as an answer. A far more obvious answer is at hand: A non cremated, entombed human corpse requires one single stūpa, while ashes and isolated bones can be placed in large numbers of them.²² The *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* maintains that the relics of the Buddha were divided into eight portions that were placed in eight different stūpas. Later tradition holds that Emperor Aśoka made a further division of the bodily relics into 84'000 portions that were placed in as many different stūpas.²³ If the body of the Buddha had not been cremated, there could then be only one stūpa, and it might have been impossible to put authentic bodily relics in large numbers of them.

21 The story of King Muṇḍa and his dead wife Bhaddā might lend some credence to this.

22 Note however RANADE's (1933:43) following observation with regard to *saṃādhīs*: "It is not uncustomary among the Hindus to erect many different *Samādhīs* in honour of the same person at different places, though the original and the most important *Samādhī* may be at one central place only."

23 STRONG, 2004:124f.

Interestingly, the passage in which the Buddha tells Ānanda how his dead body must be dealt with speaks of just one stūpa. Does this mean that the Buddha was ignorant of the division of relics that would follow his death? It is hard to believe that his early followers believed that. They cannot have believed that the Buddha did not know what was to become the most popular form of Buddhist worship everywhere, viz. the worship of relics in stūpas. The hypothesis I propose avoids this difficulty: it considers that the original account knew of only one stūpa, and that the uncremated body of the Buddha was placed in that stūpa after having been preserved in oil for a while.

In order to show how easily an earlier account *without* cremation could have been turned in one *with* cremation, I propose to look at one of the relevant parallel passages, this one from the Pāli *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, which seems fairly representative. Ānanda asks the Buddha how his body should be treated.²⁴ The Buddha answers: just like the body of a world-ruler (*cakkavatti*, Skt. *cakravartin*). How is that? He explains:²⁵

Ānanda, the remains of a wheel-turning monarch are wrapped in a new linen-cloth. This they wrap in teased cotton wool, and this in a new cloth. Having done this five hundred times each, they enclose the king's body in an oil-vat of iron, which is covered with another iron pot. [...] They raise a stūpa at a crossroads. That, Ānanda, is what they do with the remains of a wheel-turning monarch, and they should deal with the Tathāgata's body in the same way. A stūpa should be erected at the crossroads for the Tathāgata.

We should not be disturbed by the exaggerations in this passage. Bareau has argued, on the basis of a comparison with parallels, that they are later additions. What does concern us is the line which I have skipped. It reads: “*Then having made a funeral-pyre of all manner of perfumes they cremate the king's body.*” That is all. This little phrase may have been inserted. Or it may have replaced something else, something that did not stand in the way of a smooth transition from immersing the body in oil and raising a stūpa. Of course, once this insertion or replacement was made, the remainder of the story was told in accordance with the now acquired conviction that the dead body of the Buddha had been cremated.

Essentially the same passage, this time with reference to King Mahāsudarśana, has been preserved in recently discovered Kharoṣṭhī fragments in

24 This passage speaks about the worship of the Buddha's body (*sarīrapūjā*, Skt. *śarīrapūjā*), not about the worship of his bodily relics; see SCHOPEN, 1991; SILK, 2006.

25 DN II p. 141f.; tr. Walshe, modified. Cp. WALDSCHMIDT, 1950–1951:360f.; SILK, 2006:9.

Gāndhārī belonging to the so-called Schøyen collection. This passage is independent of any of its versions in Pāli, Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan, and this makes it particularly interesting for our purposes. This Gāndhārī version appears to preserve the memory that immersing in oil served the purpose of preservation, for the body of King Mahāsudarśana here undergoes that treatment twice over, in the following manner:²⁶

[...] they put it in a vat [...]. After an interval of a week, they took (it) out of the vat of oil and bathed the body with all fragrant liquids [...]. They wrapped the body with (five) hundred pairs of (unbeaten) cloth. Having wrapped the body with five hundred pairs of unbeaten cloth, (they filled?) an iron vat with oil [...]. After building a pyre of (all) fragrant [woods], they burned the body of King Mahāsudarśana. They built a stūpa at the crossing of four main roads.

Suppose now that the hypothesis here presented is correct. In that case there would originally have been only one stūpa, containing the non-cremated bodily remains of the Buddha. The building of this stūpa might have taken some time, which would explain the need to preserve the dead body, presumably by immersing it in oil. Some of these features find unexpected confirmation in a passage preserved in a Chinese translation of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* and studied and analyzed by Bareau (1970–1971: II:314–320).²⁷ Bareau argues convincingly that this passage was composed independently and was only later inserted into the Sūtra. This passage is unaware of the division and distribution of the bodily relics of the Buddha, and speaks about their inclusion in one single stūpa, built not far from Kuśinagara, the village where the Buddha died. What is more, this passage speaks of a period of 90 days that separates the construction of the stūpa from the death of the Buddha. Bareau finds this tradition more plausible than the usual one, and wonders whether it may be closer to historical reality (p. 320). If our hypothesis is correct, it is closer to historical reality, or at least closer to the initial account claiming to describe it.

Let us at this point once more return to the tombs called *samādhi* in which Hindu renouncers are believed to reside in a state of yogic concentration. This belief is not altogether unknown to Buddhism. Mahākāśyapa, a disciple of the Buddha, is recorded in various texts to reside in such a state inside Mount Kukkuṭapāda in Northern India, awaiting the time of the future Buddha Maitreya.

26 ALLEN & SALOMON, 2000:258; SALOMON, 2001:244.

27 TI 5.

John S. Strong (1992:62f.) presents the story as it occurs in various texts in the following words:

Mahākāśyapa is [...] ready to “die”. After paying his last respects to the relics of the Buddha and sending word to King Ajātaśatru of his impending parinirvāṇa, he ascends Mount Kukkuṭapāda near Rājagṛha and sits himself down between the three summits of that peak. There he makes a firm resolve that his body, his bowl, and his monastic robe (which had been given to him by the Buddha) should not decay after his parinirvāṇa, but should remain perfectly preserved inside Mount Kukkuṭapāda until the advent of the future Buddha Maitreya. Then he enters into the trance of cessation; the mountain-top opens up to receive him and miraculously encloses his body.

Unlike other Buddhist saints, then, Mahākāśyapa does not auto-incinerate his own body; nor is he to be cremated by others. Indeed, when King Ajātaśatru begins to gather firewood for a grand funeral, Ānanda stops him. “The Venerable Mahākāśyapa is not to be cremated!” he declares. “His body preserved in an ecstatic trance, he will await the arrival of Maitreya.” And Ānanda describes how, in the distant future, the mountain will open up again and how Maitreya will show Mahākāśyapa’s body to his disciples and receive (or take) from him the Buddha Śākyamuni’s robe. In this way, Mahākāśyapa (or at least his body) is to act as a sort of link between two Buddhas – the last one and the next one – and so as a kind of guarantee of the continuity of the Dharma.

What is not clear in this tradition is just when Mahākāśyapa is thought to attain parinirvāṇa. Is he alive inside the mountain in a deep meditative trance, from which he will emerge at the time of Maitreya? Or is he dead and only a sort of preserved mummy on which hangs the Buddha’s robe?

Some texts seem to indicate the latter. Mahākāśyapa, they claim, attains parinirvāṇa before the mountain closes in on him. His body will remain preserved until the coming of Maitreya, but he will not then revive. Thus, in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*, Maitreya shows Mahākāśyapa’s corpse to his disciples and displays to them the Buddha’s robe, and they are filled with awe. Similarly, the “Maitreyāvadāna” (*Divyāvadāna*, chapter 3) speaks of Mahākāśyapa’s “skeleton” (*asthisamghāta*) and describes how Maitreya will take it up “in the right hand, set it in his left, and teach the Dharma to his disciples”.

Other texts, however, appear to indicate that Mahākāśyapa does remain alive in his mountain, in a meditative state of suspended animation. Hsüan-tsang, who visited the mountain in the seventh century, claims that, with Maitreya’s arrival, Mahākāśyapa will emerge from his trance, perform his miracles, and only then pass into parinirvāṇa. The *Mi le ta ch’eng fo ching* adds some details to this scenario. It tells how Maitreya will first knock on the summit of Mahākāśyapa’s peak and then open it “the way a cakravartin opens a city gate”. The god Brahmā will then anoint Mahākāśyapa’s head with divine oil, strike a gong, and blow the conch shell of the Dharma. This royal consecration will awaken the saint from his trance; he will get up, kneel down in front of Maitreya, and offer him the robe that the Buddha had confided to him. Only then will he enter parinirvāṇa, his body ablaze with flames. Another Maitreyist text, the Khotanese *Maitreya samiti*, describes a somewhat similar scene. Mahākāśyapa, coming out of his trance, expresses his good fortune at having been able to meet *two* Buddhas personally,

and then he launches into a long sermon explaining how the “leftover disciples”, initiated but not brought to final Nirvāṇa by one Buddha, are usually saved by the next. He then displays his magical powers and enters parinirvāṇa.

I am not at all sure what can be concluded from this story. The parallelism with the entombment of Hindu saints in so-called *samādhis* seems evident. It is less obvious whether the story of Mahākāśyapa preserves a very ancient Buddhist memory, or is rather evidence of external influence on Buddhism. It is in this context also interesting to remember that all the bodily remains of the earlier Buddha Kāśyapa, to be distinguished from the disciple Mahākāśyapa, were present in one single stūpa according to the Chinese pilgrims Faxian and Xuanzang. Other sources suggest that they are there in the form of a complete skeleton.²⁸ Whatever the correct explanation of these two stories, they do not conflict with the hypothesis according to which the Buddha was not cremated. It may even lend some support to it.

In this context it is also interesting to mention a passage from a Vinaya text preserved in Chinese translation (TI 1463). Bareau refers to it in an article (1962:230), drawing attention to a rule that stipulates that clothes should not be taken from a corpse placed in a stūpa.²⁹ Bareau concludes from this, no doubt correctly, that this passage proves that inhumation was current in ancient India. It further shows that non incinerated corpses were put in stūpas or stūpa-like structures.

I cannot leave this topic without referring to a recent article by Peter Skilling (2005).³⁰ In this article he draws attention to the fact that a variety of Buddhist texts distinguish two types of relics, the second of which are what he calls solid *ekaghana* relics. These were supposedly left behind by certain Buddhas, and could not be divided into numerous parts. Having presented the rather extensive evidence for the existence of these two types, Skilling poses some questions in the following passage (p. 302):

Why did the theory of the two types of relics develop? What function did it serve? It seems that from the beginning – and before the conscious classifications were developed – the relics of Śākyamuni were believed to be fragmentary, since they were divided into eight portions, and later further distributed by Aśoka the Great into 84,000 stūpas. Since the early spread of Buddhism was also a spread of relics and stūpas, there was a constant need for rel-

28 STRONG, 2004:33f.

29 “Si, à l’intérieur du terre, le cadavre n’est pas encore détruit, les vêtements qui sont sur le cadavre ne doivent pas être pris.”

30 Cf. SILK, 2006:85f.

ics, and for an ideology that explained their significance. [...] But what was the function of the solid *ekaghana* relics? Can the belief in solid relics itself be a trace of an earlier or alternative belief?

Skilling explores some further possibilities, but I will not cite these. His question whether the belief in solid relics can be a trace of an earlier belief is particularly relevant in the context of our present reflections. Indeed, it would agree with our hypothesis. This hypothesis, if correct, would also oblige us to reconsider the statement according to which the relics of Śākyamuni were believed to be fragmentary *from the beginning*. They were no doubt from an early date onward, but perhaps not quite from the beginning, and the belief in solid relics might conceivably be a trace of an earlier period during which even the bodily remains of Śākyamuni were not yet believed to be divided up into numerous parts.

I am not going to press the hypothesis just presented. It is obviously hazardous to propose alternatives in cases where the historical sources are almost unanimous.³¹ All Buddhist traditions maintain that the Buddha's body was cremated after his death, so alternative hypotheses need to be supported by strong evidence indeed.

Let us recall what exactly we are discussing. We are discussing the earliest accessible account of what happened to the lifeless body of the Buddha. This earliest account does not necessarily tell us something about what really happened. The sometimes fantastic accounts which we find in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* and parallel texts are clearly the outcome of much editorial activity.³² Perhaps these accounts allow us to reconstruct the earlier account from which they all derived, but the historical reliability of this earlier account is not guaranteed. The hypothesis I have presented concerns an account that is presumably

31 Not fully, as we have seen. John S. Strong (2007) draws attention to a number of passage (among them those we have considered above) to show that there are two Buddha relic traditions represented in the surviving literature.

32 This in spite of the fact that the death of the Buddha "was, if any, very present in the collective memory of the early community and when the text[s] were composed" (HINÜBER, 2008:22). If one accepts that "it is hard to avoid the conclusion that during the lifetime of the Buddha the Buddhists had an order of monks only and that this is exactly the situation as reflected in the *suttantas*" (ibid., p. 24), and keeps in mind that according to all versions "when the Buddha dies, no nun is present, only monks and gods" (p. 22), it is tempting to conclude that the order of nuns was created after the reworking of the account of the Buddha's demise.

older than the one underlying those that have come down to us.³³ Its historical reliability is not guaranteed either. What really happened to the body of the Buddha after his death is likely to remain forever unknown to us, and was perhaps unknown to those who created the different accounts. There is however one major difference between them and us. *We* may consider that the Buddha died in a forgotten corner of northern India, with few noticing except some of his most devoted pupils. For the creators of the Buddhist tradition such a scenario was unimaginable. For them, the Buddha was as great as, if not greater than the greatest king, and his death could not but have been the occasion for elaborate celebratory activity. *They* told the story the way they were convinced it had to have been, and this is the story which became the basis for further elaborations and, perhaps, modifications.

To conclude, let us return once more to Hendrik Kern. His view according to which there had never been a body of the Buddha may have to be discarded. However, we may know a lot less of the whereabouts and the fate of that body than most of Kern's contemporaries, and indeed most Buddhist scholars until today, thought and think.

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33 This would be all the more remarkable if – as Oskar von Hinüber has argued in his presidential lecture “Hoary past and hazy memories: tracing the history of early Buddhist texts” at the XVth Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies (Atlanta, 2008) – parts of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* may have been composed before the establishment of the Maurya empire.

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Abbreviations

AN *Aṅguttara Nikāya.*

ChānUp *Chāndogya Upaniṣad.*

DN *Dīghanikāya*, ed. T. W. Rhys Davids, J. E. Carpenter, 3 vols. 1890–1911 (PTS).

HistDh See Kane, HistDh.

Kane, HistDh Pandurang Vaman Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, second edition, Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 5 vols. 1968–1977.

PTS Pali Text Society, London.

Rām *Rāmāyaṇa*, crit. ed. G. H. Bhatt a.o., Baroda 1960–1975.

TI *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō or Taishō Issaikyō*, 100 vols. Tōkyō 1924ff.

